

Title	Mediating affect in John Pilger's Utopia: 'the good life' as a structure of whiteness
Type	Article
URL	<a href="https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/12042/">https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/12042/</a>
Date	2017
Citation	Cefai, Sarah (2017) Mediating affect in John Pilger's Utopia: 'the good life' as a structure of whiteness. Cultural Studies, 32 (1). pp. 126-148. ISSN 0950-2386 (print); 1466-4348 (web)
Creators	Cefai, Sarah

### **Usage Guidelines**

Please refer to usage guidelines at <http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact [ualresearchonline@arts.ac.uk](mailto:ualresearchonline@arts.ac.uk).

License: Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives

Unless otherwise stated, copyright owned by the author

## **Mediating whiteness in John Pilger's Utopia: 'the good life' as a structure of affect**

Sarah Cefai<sup>a\*</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>London College of Communication, University of the Arts, London, UK*

Postal Address: The Media School, London College of Communication, Elephant & Castle, London, SE1 6SB.

\*Email: [s.cefai@lcc.arts.ac.uk](mailto:s.cefai@lcc.arts.ac.uk) ([s.cefai@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:s.cefai@surrey.ac.uk) until 12 June 2017)

Sarah Cefai is a Lecturer in Communications and Media. She has previously taught media, communications and cultural studies at the University of Surrey and LSE. Sarah was awarded her PhD by the University of Sydney in Gender and Cultural Studies (2012) and has published in the areas of queer theory, affect and cultural studies.

## **Mediating whiteness in John Pilger's *Utopia*: 'the good life' as a structure of affect**

This article proposes that whiteness should be thought as an affective structure. It draws together ideas from cultural studies, cultural anthropology and critical Indigenous studies to theorize whiteness in terms of optimism, possessive subjectivity and multiculturalism. The first section of the article shows how the optimism of 'the good life' (Berlant 2011) is linked structurally to whiteness in the construction of the Australian nation-state. Within this context, I introduce *Utopia* (2013). Made by the journalist and documentary film maker John Pilger, *Utopia* specifically identifies *whiteness as an affective structure*. The following sections of the article unpack this claim. First, I consider how the affective structure of the Australian nation-state is encountered through the mutual mediation of 'media' and 'place'. I focus on the example of the film's journey to Rottnest Island—formerly an island prison, now the destination of holiday makers—to highlight how the optimism of arrival links whiteness to the present. Second, I develop an analysis of the affective 'surfaces' (Probyn 1996) of whiteness by analyzing the film's encounter with 'White Man faciality' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and Indigenous 'slow death' (Berlant 2011). Through producing a series of faces, *Utopia* portrays whiteness as a *deflective surface* that propagates the 'onto-pathology' of white Australia (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014). *Utopia* also portrays whiteness as an *absorptive surface* in which Aboriginal self-possession—including, in the form of *life*—disappears. The film emphasizes the loss of Aboriginal life through illness and suicide linked to incarceration, overcrowding, and state led impoverishment. The article concludes by locating media (including *Utopia*) within the tension between absorption and deflection as a tension between the different spatial actions of affective relations that mediate whiteness.

Key words: space, place, media, affect, whiteness

### **The Australian 'the good life': optimism as whiteness**

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant offers an account of "the good life" as a cultural fantasy that is linked historically to an optimism about structural

transformation. This article claims that a critical engagement with the optimism of the good life fantasy can help us to understand the omnipresence of Australian ‘White-ethnic power relations’ (Hage 1998 p. 15). Berlant (2011) has defined the good life as a ‘moral-intimate-economic thing’ (p. 2) originating in the post-Second World War period in the United States and Europe. This means that her critique of the good life can be taken up to analyze the affective structure that links intimacy to national growth and economy. While from 1990 onwards the ‘optimism about structural transformation realized less and less traction in the world’ (p. 3), Berlant observes that people have nevertheless remained attached to the promise of ‘conventional good-life fantasies’ (p. 2). That is, optimism remains a primary cultural force despite the fact that in late modernity the promise of a good life has waxed and waned under the pressures of globalization and neoliberalism—often becoming the scene of ‘impasse’ (p. 4) at the expense of the very promised ‘expansive transformation’ (p. 2). Berlant hence terms the perpetual return to the promise of optimism a ‘cruel’ (p. 2) attachment.

It is by taking up the analysis of the good life that I examine the ‘historical sensorium’ (p. 3) of whiteness. I begin by suggesting that the cultural construction of whiteness relies upon a fantasmatic optimism linked to the historical emergence of whiteness within colonialism (Moreton-Robinson 2011a, Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014), as well as the more recent emergence of Australian multiculturalism (Hage 1998, Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014, Povinelli 2002). In so doing, I respond to the critical Indigenous call to ‘racialize whiteness’ (Moreton-Robinson 2011) as well as the ‘need to actively seek out how “whiteness” is being produced, claimed and positioned in the social relations of particular places and times’ (Lewis 2007, p. 882) recognized in *Cultural Studies*. The remaining sections of

the article pursue this aim by linking whiteness to the affective structure of the Australian nation-state. For this purpose, I draw on the theorization of race as ‘ordinary’ (Lewis 2007) and explore the ways in which ordinariness is affective—‘animated and inhabitable’ (Stewart 2007, p. 1)—and takes form through ‘a dream of escape or the simple life’ (p. 1). I challenge ‘the construction of “whiteness” as devoid of cultural specificity’ (Lewis 2007, p. 874) by describing the affective mediation that gives rise to ‘the invisible norm against which other races are judged in the construction of identity, representation, subjectivity, nationalism and the law’ (Moreton-Robinson 2011, p. vii). A documentary film about the oppression of Indigenous Australians by white society—John Pilger’s *Utopia* (2013)—presents an opportunity to draw out the affective ordinariness of whiteness from an otherwise representational polemic.

My analysis of the film is organised into two sections. The first of these picks up on the ways in which *Utopia*’s media images *mediate* the affective relationship between media and space. In so doing, I identify whiteness as an affective structure that is mediated spatially—through the emergence of ‘interrelations’ (Massey 2005, p. 9). I focus specifically on the example of the film’s journey to Rottnest Island—formerly an island prison, now the destination of holiday makers—to highlight how the optimism of arrival links whiteness to the present. Secondly, I develop an analysis of the affective ‘surfaces’ (Probyn 1996) of whiteness by analyzing the aesthetic medium of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari term ‘faciality’—the production of ‘significance and subjectification’ (1987, p. 167) through the conceptual and aesthetic personae of the face. *Utopia* produces an encounter with ‘White Man faciality’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) as a *deflective surface* that mediates the structure of whiteness by embodying administrative, humanitarian and dominant cultural affects.

This mediation of affect is consistent with the account of Australian whiteness as an ‘onto-pathology’ (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014)—a possessive subjectivity predicated on its very indifference to (dis)possession. I juxtapose deflection with the *absorptive surfaces* in which Aboriginal self-possession—including, in the form of *life*—disappears. The film’s emphasis on the loss of Aboriginal lives through illness and suicide linked to incarceration, overcrowding, and state-led impoverishment points to an Indigenous ‘slow death’ (Berlant 2011). Finally, the article concludes by locating media (including *Utopia*) within the tension between absorption and deflection, as a tension between the different spatial actions of affective relations that mediate whiteness. It is within the affective structure of whiteness, understood as a mediating torsion between deflection and absorption, that calls for social justice disappear.

My opening claim is that optimism is key to the social construction of the Australian nation-state and as such is key also to the formation of whiteness as an affective structure. Whiteness has always been the basis of an imagined, “inclusive”, Australian society in which racialized Others could be assimilated (Hage 1998, Maddison 2011, Moreton-Robinson 2003, 2005, 2011, Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014). The so called White Australia Policy that biopolitically incorporated “race” into the Australian nation from 1901 to 1973 through the *Immigration Restriction Act* enshrined in law the cultural fantasy of the ‘white nation’ (Hage 1998) that functioned ‘to exclude all non-white races from the nation’ (Pugliese 2002, p. 154). The eugenic policy of racial assimilation took the form of an optimism for the racial superiority of whiteness, by dint of which it was imagined that the Indigenous “element”<sup>1</sup> could be extinguished. An optimism for the power of the British legislature and military might to extinguish all trace of human life from new-

found land was embodied in *Terra Nullius*—a legal entity that while derided by Indigenous activists and liberal critics alike, has never been overturned (Moreton-Robinson 2007). The exile of British convicts to a penal colony 10,000 miles away betrays too politicians', policymakers' and political elites' optimism for the colonization of Australia. And the propaganda that lured new British migrants into the Ten Pound Pom scheme espoused an optimism for the traction of the good life fantasy within the working and lower middle class imaginary of British people—from the end of the Second World War all the way until the 1980s. "People followed their dream of a better life", says one participant in *Ten Pound Poms*—a 1997 Touch Productions documentary for BBC Worldwide. Indeed, a quick glance at BBC programming on the topic of Australia suggests that the lure continues on. We can surmise that whether or not new arrivals *felt* optimistic for long, the structure of affect that invested the nation as an object of attachment has been an optimistic one. As such, optimism can be understood as a cultural affect that locates whiteness as 'an "object-target of" and "condition for" contemporary forms of biopower' (Anderson 2011, p. 2).

British imperialism specifically characterizes the formation of 'white possession' (Moreton-Robinson 2005, p. 21) in the Australian context. Whiteness takes form as a possessive relation *to* the nation: the construction of whiteness as an affective attachment to the nation is the effect of historically asymmetrical power relations. In the words of Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Fiona Nicoll, 'patriarchal white sovereignty operates ideologically, materially and discursively to reproduce and maintain its investment in the nation as a white possession' (2006, p. 150). This fantasmatic investment is at once *an optimistic attachment* to whiteness and to the nation, that, in turn, links whiteness to Indigenous dispossession. The Australian nation-state and its birthing of "being Australian" is predicated on the renewed

disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty, which ‘has never been ceded, but this is denied by Australian law’ (Moreton-Robinson 2007, p. 3). The translation of ‘the privileged racial category of whiteness ... into property that assumes both material and symbolic forms’ by the law instantiates ‘institutionalized relations of racialized power’ (Perera and Pugliese 2011, p. 70, discussing Harris 1993). Indigenous people’s ‘ontological relation to land’ (Moreton-Robinson 2003, p. 36) challenges the legal and philosophical foundations of Australia. As Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos (2014) explain, without the capacity to reflect on the fundamental role of ‘the subject as a property-owning identity’ (p. 51), ‘white Australia has yet to produce a philosophy and a history to address precisely that which is fundamental to its existence, namely our being as occupier’ (p. 14). We might say that in place of that philosophy white Australia has optimism.

Indeed, Elizabeth Povinelli describes Australian multiculturalism as ‘a deeply *optimistic* liberal engagement with the democratic form under conditions of extreme torsion as social and cultural differences proliferate and as capital formations change’ (2002, p. 25, my emphasis). This optimism is linked intrinsically to the ‘onto-pathology’ (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014, p. 14) of white Australia because ‘freedom and a sense of belonging do not derive from rightful dwelling in this land but from the affirmation of the power to receive and to manage the perpetual-foreigners-within’ (p. 14). That is, whiteness continues to be ‘the invisible measure of who can hold possession’ (Moreton-Robinson 2003, p. 26) because the ‘processes of recognition’ that are addressed to ‘foreigners-within’ provide the opportunity for the ‘self-instituting being of the white Australian collective’ to demonstrate ‘the appearance of ontologically legitimate possession only by co-opting an other who is capable of taking part’ (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014, p.



85). Moreover, the bequeathing of Aboriginal citizenship through, for example, instruments of recognition such as Native Title, problematically reinscribes Indigenous *alterity* as an abstract measure of national belonging (Povinelli 2002). The affective structure of whiteness must then accommodate these complex borders in its renewal of the privileged place of the white ‘settler’ experience as the basis of the shared investment in the nation (as an object of whiteness) within Australian multiculturalism.

### **Utopia: the case study**

As a polemic, *Utopia* is largely blind to the proliferation of social and cultural difference Povinelli discusses. Instead, the film focuses on the historical continuity of the violence that has been directed towards Indigenous people since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. The film highlights the ‘punitive paternalism’ (Wacquant 2012, p. 76) that criminalises Aboriginal people whose failure to embody norms of work and socialisation has become the grounds for the moral legitimisation of neglect.

Indigenous people are on the receiving end of a ‘hygienic governmentality’ predicated upon a normative concept of sovereignty that considers certain forms of human activity ‘inconvenient’ (Berlant 2011, p. 97). The film’s critique of punitive paternalism links the failings of the state to the symbolic violence of the national community’s ongoing refusal to acknowledge Indigenous people’s *inalienable* ownership of their country (Moreton-Robinson 2007). This linking of symbolic and material violence is typically derided by the mainstream media, whose representations have instead ‘parodied the horrible suffering of Aboriginal people’ (Langton 2008, p. 2) within a ‘vast “reality show”’ constructed through exchanges between ‘media, parliaments, public service and the Aboriginal world’ (p. 2). *Utopia* represents the

failings in the provision of health, housing and criminal justice, as witnessed by Traditional Owners, Aboriginal activists and community representatives, Indigenous and non-Indigenous key workers (especially in health), and Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers (for Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations). These failings take effect in what Berlant has called the ‘slow death’ (2011) that wears out marginal populations. Given that still today ‘most media theory in Australia has yet to take account of research in whiteness studies’ (Osuri and Banerjee 2004, p.153), *Utopia* can be positioned as addressing both the woeful inadequacy of the media and media studies.

Despite the rich contribution of people who live or work in Aboriginal Communities to the film, its decontextualisation of Aboriginal Australia is striking. In contrasting the poverty of remote Aboriginal communities like Utopia with the fortunes enjoyed by Australia’s economic and political elite, the film makes no reference to how most Indigenous Australians live—in the populated areas of Australia’s south east. Likewise, the film makes little mention of Indigenous Affairs, or the achievements of Indigenous Australians in politics, education and culture, or the way that ‘the signifier “indigenusness” began to function as an interpretant to be experience as an aura’, as well as has been ‘resituated within a complex field of national and international civil and human rights standards’ (Povinelli 2002, p. 24). Perhaps that is too much to ask from a documentary geared to educate an audience in the basics of black and white Australia. However, by implication Pilger erroneously suggests that most Indigenous Australians live remotely in conditions like those suffered in Utopia. Such a simplified view cannot help but overlook, in particular, the anarchy of the state as a ‘*human creation* which is simultaneously peopled and the site of ongoing (emotional, political and administrative) struggles to align activities

that *in practice* leak hither and thither' (Lea 2012, p 110, my italics). Moreover, Pilger's account of the community Utopia is thin on historical detail and naturalizes demographics. Claiming that "[p]eople live here because this has been their homeland for thousands of years", for example, disregards the geography of administration that has compelled people to dwell in and around administrative centres. The significance of complex interactions between anthropologists, law and policy-makers and Indigenous societies is addressed within an academic literature (e.g. see Altman and Hinkson 2010). My contribution here is to locate the affective mediation of whiteness in such intricacies of representation—in the composition of media images that moves the viewer narratively between places and faces.

*Utopia* opens at an iconic spot—a coastal area of north Sydney called the Northern Beaches, well known for its natural beauty and its affluence. "This is Sydney, jewel of Australia, and the good life," starts the voiceover. As Pilger speaks, the camera pans the yachts in the Hawkesbury, before the journalist and documentary filmmaker is escorted by property manager Diana Edwards into a Palm Beach holiday rental overlooking the Pacific. "Isn't it beautiful?" she asks, as they walk into the multi-million-dollar property—all pool, decking and glass exteriors. "That's the Pacific Ocean at its best," Edwards titters. "It's like being on a ship." The camera looks out to the wide expanse of the ocean as the waves roll in to the froth of the shoreline. This is how the film begins, locating the 'the good life' of Australia in property ownership and a sea view. We might even say that likening the property to "being on a ship" is an allusion to the phantasmatic pleasures of colonial *arrival*.

No sooner has the film introduced the viewer to the good life, does it relocate to the *less-than* good life of Aboriginal Australia. The spatial juxtaposition between the Northern Beaches of Sydney and the remote Aboriginal community of Utopia,

north east of Alice Springs, is constituted by a series of images that segue from “here” to “there”. The film cuts away from the sea-view with images of still green waters and forests. The sea laps at an inshore cliff; a red-yellow-grey sandstone rock-face stands tall, covered in green foliage; trees grow up from the rocks, and streams of water flow along a sandy bed. Upon this landscape a translucent image of red headdresses and white marks is superimposed. The trace of Aboriginal bodies sweeps over the water and rock, as Pilger narrates:

Behind this million-dollar view, is the other Australia. A secret battle ground, where the First People of Australia fought the invading British. This was their land, which they defended bravely and with ingenuity. But they had no guns, and were defeated. In 1838 *The (Sydney) Monitor* reported: “It was resolved to exterminate the whole race of blacks in that quarter.”

Pilger accents the film’s arrival “there”—in the Aboriginal community—stating: “And this is how many of the survivors live today.”

Arriving in the Aboriginal community—taking a journey beyond the horizon of dominant media, but via the modernist perspective of the media as a vantage point from which to see—we see a countryman in a blue shirt and cowboy hat sitting in a half-open, sunbaked humpy; a close-up of the countryman; two dogs sitting among strewn rubbish and discarded belongings; a view through the inside-outside of a dilapidated tin shed; a woman lying outside, pulling a black beanie downwards to shield her eyes from the sunlight; a medium shot of the woman who is shielding her eyes that brings into view two women who sit beside her under the shade of a tree. Eric Elkedra of the Ampilatwatja Health Centre walks around the veranda of his house, casting long shadows amidst objects including a wheelie bin and a free-standing washing machine.<sup>2</sup> In response to Pilger’s questioning, Elkedra lists the basic necessities that are missing from his place of residence—running water, electricity, a

kitchen, air-conditioning. Pointing to the nearby office of the Government Business Manager, Pilger provokes: “and he’s got 18 air-conditioners.” “Yeah, he should’ve given me one then,” Elkedra jokes in response. *Utopia* marks out this space, between Elkedra’s joke and Edward’s ship.

Having visited Utopia, the film moves quickly back to the good life and its origins in nation-building propaganda. This ‘movement’ exemplifies the ‘contemporaneous plurality’ (Massey 2005, p. 9) of the Indigenous and white Australian cultural experience within the film’s media images, by which the film navigates the racist axis of the state. The example of migration propaganda clearly links whiteness to the governance of an Australian population. Whiteness is pictured here *as* a form of *governmentality*—the embodiment of an idealized self through specific, socially regulated practices *of* the self that approximate an ideal form of social experience. In the 1960s the government used propaganda to construct the good life of the great outdoors, sunshine and sea—“dependent”, says Pilger, “upon airbrushing out an entire human community”. “Ah, this is better, the life for me”, says the voiceover to the excerpted film *Australia presents Another Sunny Day in Western Australia* (The Commonwealth Film Unit 1961). Life in the Australian suburbs marketed the “White Australia Policy”, linking immigration to middle-class values, leisure time and the consumption of nature. The celebratory film *Canberra’s Calling to You* (1938) starts to roll to the tune:

Like a jewel so rare  
in a setting that’s fair  
A city of white was born.  
...  
Australia’s creation  
the heart of a nation  
‘Neath azure skies of blue,  
Where ever you are,

be it near or far  
Canberra's calling to you.<sup>3</sup>

The call of Canberra's manicured gardens is the call of the good life. Like the call to the Northern Beaches, the call of Canberra perpetuates a spatial strategy of racial domination without naming whiteness as such. It is the call of propaganda that mobilizes an image of a place, which has itself been constructed in the image of an ideal space (a garden, a beach). Whiteness is encoded within this call (to the good life, to property ownership) as mediated affect. I now develop an account of the spatial nature of this call.

### **The mediation of place: whiteness and the Australian chronotope**

As the camera travels down the tree-lined streets of Barton, Pilger explains that this affluent suburb was named after a former Prime Minister whose Immigration Restriction Act, passed in 1901, formally began the White Australia Policy. "The doctrine of man, said Barton, was never intended to apply to those who weren't British, and white skinned", says Pilger, implicating suburbia in its racist origins. Archival footage of the "mining magnate"<sup>4</sup> Lang Hancock similarly joins up the racist past with the present, via video-images of his daughter and successor, Gina Rinehart. The title sequence of *Utopia* opens with an archived broadcast interview, in which Hancock calmly advocates sterilization of "the ones that are no good to themselves and who can't accept things, the half-castes." To the television broadcaster he says, with resolve: "I would dope the water up so that they were sterile and would breed themselves out in the future, and that would solve the problem".<sup>5</sup> The film later cites media footage of Rinehart (successfully) agitating public resistance to the introduction of Kevin Rudd's "mining tax" (a liberal initiative to redistribute a

fraction of mining profits). Inheritor of mining billions and one time major shareholder in Fairfax Media (2010-15), Rinehart's media performance signifies the historical present of her father's antiquated racism.

Barton, Hancock and Rinehart are particular white subjects whose biographical stories tell a story about the Australian nation. Their stories are positioned as historical conjunctions that are re-inscribed in the present as derivative of a way of life. Rinehart draws a line from Hancock's televised call for genocide by other means, to the present. The suburb of Barton is a spatialization of this call, in which we the viewers become somehow implicated as we travel through. The back catalogue of media images that Pilger incorporates into *Utopia* reflects the spatial and temporal dimensions of the 'white teleology' of the media. The film diagrams a 'power-geometry' (Massey 2005, p. 64) constituted by media images in which 'whiteness functions as an embodied, ethnicised structure of power placed in the historico-cultural context of the nation' (Osuri and Banerjee 2004, p. 160). *Utopia's* stories act as points of navigation through a media cartography.

The center-margin model of media power is illustrated in a section of the film that analyses the media "build up" to the Northern Territory Emergency Response (known as "the Intervention") (see Macoun 2012). Pilger recounts how "a lurid media campaign led by a national TV program called *Lateline*" lay "the ground for the Intervention". Here, *Utopia* points to the increasing involvement of media in Indigenous policy-making that is driven by the mediatized practices of bureaucrats—among other things (McCallum and Waller 2013). The current affairs program that spurred media attention, however, illustrated its item on the so-called 'crisis community' (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 2009) of Mutitjulu with images of an entirely different community. The fact of this "mistaken identity" stands in for the

distance or *lack of contact* between Mutitjulu and the media economy enacting its representation. *Utopia* positions itself in this unfathomable gap between “the media” those “on the ground”, as a critical media source that intervenes in Australia’s ‘*positive self-affirmation*’ (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014, p. 72).

*Utopia* interacts with Australia’s media as a ‘politics of location’ (Probyn 1990): the film is expressly concerned with how ‘empire is constituted through means of communication’ (Berland 2009 p. 5, discussing Innis 1951). By ‘rendering sites into sequences’ (Probyn 1990, p. 184), *Utopia* incorporates the Australian media archive into a critique of colonial knowledge. The temporal progress of the film enables media images to be organized ‘into sequences which are congruent with previously established categories of knowledge’ (p. 178). Sequencing, as a spatial and temporal practice, establishes and fixes knowledge into categories: ‘location describes epistemological maneuvers’ (p. 184). In this way, media images themselves adopt a sense of place—‘distance is simultaneously inscribed in and overcome by mediating technologies’ (Berland 2009, p. 5). Pilger’s narrative movement from place to place is predicated on the vantage point of the subject of knowledge. This image of movement/knowledge constructs a ‘Euclidian space’<sup>6</sup> in which relatively static entities are juxtaposed. This locative model of media spatializes ‘the invisible norm [of whiteness] against which other races are judged’ (Moreton-Robinson 2004, p. vii) by attributing nation-building to media ‘centers’. From within this treatment of ‘space as a surface’ (Massey 2005, p. 107) that can be moved across, Pilger draws out a historiography of the nation-state. This gives us the opportunity to forge an eventful notion of space by outlining some of the specific interconnections that constitute space in its ‘full contemporaneous coexistence and becoming’ (p. 110). Kathleen Stewart’s *A Space on the Side of the Road* (1996) suggests that this coexistence and



becoming might be grasped through the ethnographic writing of images—a suggestion that I take up in response to the media images of *Utopia*.

Stewart examines the ‘narrative “space on the side of the road” that enacts the *density, texture, and force* of a lived cultural poetics somewhere in the real and imagined hinterlands of “America”’ (p. 3, my italics). Based on an ethnography of ‘the hard-core Appalachian coal-mining region of south-western West Virginia’ (p. 3), the narrative *space* begins with layered descriptions evoking *images*. That these images (allow the reader to) imagine “being there” is not an aside to Stewart’s ‘space of critique’ (p. 20). Rather, images allow the reader to be touched by an immanent sense of “being in place”. In the space on the side of the road, the sense of being in place approximates proximity with an object, while avoiding the reification of ‘a grand totalizing scheme of “objects”’ (p. 4). Stewart’s images hold in tension the ‘real’ (what has been naturalized) and the ‘culturally constructed’, the latter having been *marked* by its ‘very textualization’ (p. 22). Approximating proximity via the image (that can open a new space, or arrive at discontinuity) offers an encounter with this tension, between the real and the constructed. In ‘the space of the gap between signifier and meaning—the “space on the side of the road”’ (p. 5) a trace, a theory of culture, a displacement takes the form of this encounter. *How else* can we take something as an object, Stewart asks, ‘expect through the mediating forms it itself produces’ (p. 21)? The image is not an aesthetic flourishing (an addendum to a theory) but the very matter *of* cultural difference out of which an ethnography can emerge. By rendering tactile the relation between place and image through language, the reader enters the *space* and *theory* of ‘culture’.

Stewart (1996) works upon the mutual mediation of images and places through the literary concept of the ‘chronotope’ (p. 90). Chronotopes are expressions

of what space and time *feel* like as an effect of ‘the writing of signs into the nature of things’ (p. 20)—an enfolding of space and time that occurs in the *lived* mediation of place. The spatial conditions of ‘history’ should be viewed ‘not as an accomplished fact or a formless tendency but as an occupied space of contingency and desire in which people roam’ (p. 90). More than an image propagated by the media, the good life is an Australian chronotope: a space in which people roam, an image written into the nature of things.

There are two points to note here. First, that the entry into the space and the theory of a culture occurs through an affective relation. Namely, it is the affectivity of a place that shapes its encounter; and it is because ‘all language operates affectively’ (Gibbs 2006, p. pp) that writing can respond affectively to space. A tone of voice can resonate with ‘the quality and feeling of forms’ (Stewart 1996, p. 20). Via affect we enter the image. Via the image, we enter space. Stewart begins with a picture: ‘Picture’, she says, Chapter 1, Line 1, ‘hills so dense’ (p. 1). The affectivity of a place constitutes an ‘immanent capacity’ (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, p. 2) in which thinking can emerge, ignited like a flash of fire on flint. This capacity is an ‘accretion of force-relations’ (p. 2), described by Raymond Williams as ‘*structures of feeling*’ (1997, p. 132, italics in original) opened by the ‘literature and art’ (p. 133) that responds to dominant discourses or ‘official consciousness’ (p. 130) with ‘specific internal relations’ (p. 132), ‘specific feelings, specific rhythms’ (p. 133). Place has the capacity to express a structure of feeling. Space has an affective leaning.<sup>7</sup> Place is composed of affects and material images: in northern Australia, humidity, dustiness, and ants bring into existence a minor sense that is both exterior and interior to the national culture.

Second, the image is in the middle of space—a ‘mediator’ (Deleuze 1992, p. 281). An image is always a doubling of place: an image *of* place that is encountered *in* place. We could say that the image is always in the middle of space, shaping its emergence and our experience of its emergent properties. If art ‘produces sensations, affects, intensities’ (Grosz 2008, p. 1) that are taken from ‘the earth’ (p. 3), so too do media images. Space gives the image material properties that contribute to *its* affective form. Media images extract qualities from space and mediate a certain ‘liveness’ (Kember and Zylinska 2012, p. xvii). There is an ‘art of affect’ (Grosz 2008, p. 3) within documentary media images that induces spatial difference as an affective relation: the difference between ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘now’ and ‘then’ is a sensation that is related to the affective intensity of space. The feeling of an image has a ‘specific kind of sociality’ (Williams 1977, p. 133). Striated places too require images for their composition. Images shape *how* a space might be entered and known. Another way of saying that images are ‘in the middle of place’, is to say that image and place are in a relation of *mediation*: images mediates places, place mediates the image. Media images are in the middle of how one place relates to another.

### ***Mediating Rottnest***

The example of Pilger’s trip to Rottnest Island allows us to explore the affective mediation of the Australian chronotope. Pilger journeys to Rottnest from Perth on the Rottnest Express boat, whose recorded message can be heard in the background: “Rottnest Island is Western Australia’s idyllic island getaway”. Accompanied by local Noongar, Marianne Mackay and Noel Nannup, Pilger carves out an adjacent view, informing the viewer that “from 1838 it [the island] was a brutal prison”. As well as filming *in situ*, the camera also fixes on an image of the hotel brochure. Without

irony, the “Karma Rottnest Lodge” pamphlet bears images of a pool, spa and dining facilities. In the voice over, Pilger explains that the Karma Lodge occupies the former prison. Standing in a Lodge bedroom, Pilger describes how the room would have been 2 cells, each holding 7 people. The camera looks upon the hotel/prison courtyard, as Pilger *names this as a site* where Aboriginal people were hung, before pointing to the grass and trees growing over unmarked graves. The hotel’s kitchen formerly housed the mortuary. The pamphlet and the surrounds make no mention of the almost a hundred year history of Aboriginal imprisonment.

Each year half a million people pass through Rottnest Island, “forgetting”. The tourist imaginary, understood as a good life chronotope, shapes how people enter into and move through the space: the journey to the island takes place on the boat; tourists arrive and are shepherded off to particular spots. Elsewhere *Utopia* points to the tourism at Uluru—coincidentally, as Pilger points out, “the sacred heart of Aboriginal Australia”. Here, “tourists can enjoy the good life for more than \$2000 a night. It’s eco-sensitive, and out of sight of the poverty and slums of those whose land this is”—the people of Mutitjulu who are custodians of the rock, but who nevertheless live in houses riddled with asbestos. The desire for leisure and enjoyment mediates contingent forgetting, shaping the way in which Rottnest Island is occupied. The tourists’ enjoyment of the island contributes to the concealment of pain by the dominant culture, which is itself a mediating structure intertwined with the onto-pathology of the occupier. The concealing of pain is part of a cultural strategy of disavowal that denies people contact with objects of grief, shame and pain that exist as the potential for grief’s feelings nonetheless.

*Utopia*’s trip to Rottnest Island stages an encounter with this withholding of grief. It is this withholding that secures the present as white. This is an aspect of the

way in which the affective structure of whiteness allows space to be taken up and lived as the present. While the being of the occupier swallows up a future Australia (for example, through the engulfment of mining or the desecration of the Great Barrier Reef), intergenerational trauma takes hold of Indigenous ontologies. Life in the Aboriginal Community is, for example, taken by youth suicide, premature death due to injury and disease, and incarceration. Many communities lose a fifth of their people to custody, with the help of juridical measures like sentencing for driving offences. Policymakers refer to this epidemiology as a “gap” in life expectancy that needs “closing”. This discourse denies the feelings of grief that steals away the present, instead suggesting that the present is freely available. *Utopia*’s mediated encounter with the edifice of Karma Rottnest Lodge challenges this concealment.

The journey to Rottnest Island casts the present as the unfolding of past events—the still unfolding event of colonialism and the ‘settling’ of Australia within the British Empire. Rottnest is mediated as a remnant of another world floating about in the present. Pilger’s encounter with this remnant allows him to question how *this* occupied space of contingency and desire comes into being. The ‘settling’ of Australia—an enfolding of space and time that occurs through the lived mediation of place—continues within the terms of British postcolonialism. Footage of the re-enactment of the arrival of the First Fleet at Botany Bay positions narration as an enfolding of space and time that is too an unfolding of an ongoing event—a ‘writing of signs into the nature of things’ (Stewart 1996, p. 20). This scene of journeying and arrival asks: what is the *angle of entry* into this inhabited land? How do ‘we’ continue to establish ourselves and our relation to the land through inhabiting this point of arrival?

Rottnest and the other sites visited by *Utopia* mediate the ‘originary act of the collective’ (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014, p. xx). *Utopia*’s sites become the ‘media’ that mediates settler-colonial Australia. Rottnest’s chronotope hints at ‘the perpetual-foreigner-within’ (via the tourist) as ‘an epistemological construction aimed at satisfying the demands for ontological recognition’ (p. 84). It is the co-opting of the ‘foreigner-within’ that makes possible ‘the processes of recognition that underpin the act of taking possession of the land’ (p. 85). Rottnest’s chronotope is an immigration story manifesting in property ownership and a sea-view. The sea carries the viewer to the island image. Now an object of the tourist gaze, perhaps a source of voyeuristic pleasure—something that unhinges us from the everyday but is too completely ordinary—the island ‘enables white Australia to present its sovereignty’ (p. 86). Australia is a ‘space of shifting coastlines and watery foundations as the site of an unattainable desire for insularity’ (Perera 2009, p. 1). The island is an unstable object of an affective structure of *arrival*—tourism is a spatial mediation that locates ‘the fundamental structure of the property-owning identity that is at the heart of white Australian being’ (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014, p. 83) in the optimism of arrival.

### **Surfaces of deflection and spaces of absorption: White Australian faciality and Indigenous ‘slow death’**

As well as situating the mediation of affect in the media archival present of Australia, *Utopia* also attends to the mediating surfaces of Australia’s *faces*. So far, I have illustrated how the optimism of arrival provides an affective alibi for ‘the view that white Australia would have been essentially the same had the European conquerors actually discovered an unoccupied continent’ (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014, p. 19). Optimism can be felt in the Australian chronotope that ‘unfold[s] *as if*

the land might indeed have been unoccupied' (p. 20). The segment of *Utopia* that is filmed at the Australia Day celebrations in Sydney shows how people valorize this 'as if' defensively, through affects from laughter to aggression. Unsurprisingly, Australia Day "vox pops" decline to locate themselves 'within the history of the Indigenous peoples' (p. 21). Asked whether the event of the arrival of the First Fleet might be more appropriately marked by sadness, regret, mourning etc., they attune to the present through an articulation of optimism, reinscribing the colonizing premise of whiteness. To give some context, a 2017 poll conducted by *The Guardian* found that only 15% of Australians want the date of the day to be changed.<sup>1</sup> Pilger's questioning draws this information to the surface—the majoritarian statement of endorsement—via the conceptual and aesthetic personae of the face. Faces of Australia affectively attune to the good life.

The face, we know from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), is a 'white wall/black hole system' of 'significance and subjectification' (p. 167). In their chapter on the twinned emergence of the subject and signification 'Year Zero: Faciality', Deleuze and Guattari observe that '[c]ertain assemblages of power (*pouvoir*) require the production of a face, [while] others do not' (p. 175). Their analysis invites consideration of how *Utopia* constructs an encounter with whiteness as an assemblage of power (race) that requires the production of a face—the 'White Man face'. Australia Day "vox pops", as well as interviews with health workers, policing and law makers, politicians, bureaucrats, non-governmental professionals, Indigenous policy academics, researchers and members of Aboriginal Corporations, foreground the face, specifically the face produced by the mass media. Producing a series of faces, *Utopia* works upon mass mediated 'White-Man faciality' (p. XX) as an object of critique and an *affective surface* to be intervened upon.

Unlike the socio-biological and psychological lineages of analysis spurred by writers like Charles Darwin, Silvan Tomkins, or more recently Paul Ekman, Deleuze and Guattari make way for a theorization of the face as a system of affective surfaces that communicate whiteness through ‘the social world as surface’ (Probyn 1996, p. 19). In the film, the White Man face appears as a communicative entity—a semiotic dehumanization that absorbs the head away from the body. The ‘abstract machine of faciality’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 176) spreads across the body, objects and things. ‘Facialization operates not by resemblance but by an order of reasons’ (p. 170). Faciality is linked by correlation to the landscape: architects pepper landscapes with the ‘faces’ of ‘houses, towns or cities, monuments or factories’ whereas the ‘close-up in film treats the face primarily as a landscape’ (p. 172).

At the center of the communicative schema of faciality is ‘your average ordinary White Man’ whose ordinariness is indexed to the inscription of racial deviance—‘yellow man, black man, men in the second or third category’ (p. 178). Faciality does not permit difference, but the potential to *assimilate*, ‘to integrate nonconforming traits into increasingly eccentric and backward waves, sometimes tolerating them at given places under given conditions, in a given ghetto, sometimes erasing them from the wall, which never abides alterity (it’s a Jew, it’s an Arab, it’s a Negro, it’s a lunatic ...)’ (p. 178). The imperative to communicate interpellates bodies into racism. The capitulation of the face to communication systems is literalized in the examples of facial recognition/racial profiling—technologies that have developed upon the preexisting schemata of the face. Even if we wanted to, ‘[w]e will never succeed in making ourselves a new primitive head and body, human, spiritual and faceless. It would only be taking more photos and bouncing off the wall again’ (p. 188).<sup>8</sup>



Three faces dominate *Utopia*: the face of the bureaucrat, the face of the humanitarian, and the face of the national culture (the non-professional, the vox pop). If, '[y]ou don't so much have a face as slide into one' (p. 177), each of these *faces of whiteness* gives whiteness 'a face' that can be 'slid into'. There is too a slipperiness between these faces: Australia Day faciality is populated by the faces of the national culture, but the face of the bureaucrat can just as easily slide into the face of national culture. The face of the bureaucrat becomes the face of a humanitarian; the humanitarian slides into the administrator, and so on. Health workers dissect the environment into "impacting factors" that transact the present itself as the object-target of biopower; researchers and NGO personnel analyze the dysfunction of a government in relation to its populations; politicians enjoy the attentive camaraderie and showmanship fostered between journalists and politicians in media production.

About a third of the way through the film, Pilger interviews Margaret Quirk, former Minister of Corrective Services for Western Australia. Soon after the interview starts to roll, Quirk explains with irony: "I had to put my staff through cultural sensitivity training ... so that I could then invite the senior people from Corrective Services along, in the hope that they suddenly understand some of these fundamental issues". Reflecting on human resourcing issues, Quirk follows Pilger's lead by complying with his rapport, gesturing towards the role of misconception within Corrective Services. Quirk claims to understand the nature of these misconceptions, recalling the example of recruiting someone British to the level of management: "When asked how she understood Aboriginal culture, she said she'd come from Bradford and she'd dealt with a lot of Pakistanis so she understood these issues." Telling this story, Quirk not only gives evidence of her ability to see the flawed logic in this statement by taking an ironic distance from it, she also shows up

British ignorance about Indigenous Australia. “It was shortly after that that I arranged the Cultural Sensitivity training”, Quirk remarks. Quirk’s admission of the shortcomings of “cultural sensitivity” places her on “the right side” of history.

Here, the former Minister for Corrective Services slides between the face of the humanitarian and the bureaucrat. Pilger asks Quirk specifically about her responsibility in relation to the death of Mr Ward. In 2008, Mr Ward was being driven from a courthouse to a prison, charged with driving under the influence of alcohol. The van in which Mr Ward was being driven to the prison was unfit for purpose, with no air conditioning and metal flooring, the coroner reported that Mr Ward “cooked to death”. He died of heatstroke and third degree burns. Quirk admits: “I regard myself as at some level being personally responsible ... it’s something that I’ll go to my grave regretting intensely”. When Pilger provokes “that doesn’t happen to white people, does it?” Quirk concurs “no, of course not”. Pilger goes on to ask about prison conditions in Western Australia. Quirk explains: “At the moment they’re I think ‘racking and stacking’ them is the vernacular [Pilger: Excuse me, what is ‘racking and stacking’?] Well they’re double-bunking. So it literally is warehousing people, I think”. The humanitarian face slides into an administrative one as Quirk discusses the “facts on the ground”.

“That’s the way they filled up the slave ships”, Pilger responds. Identifying an echo of slavery within Quirk’s administration strikes a nerve, implicating Quirk in the painful inadequacy of the terms “racking and stacking”. Quirk’s wry smile and sympathetic eyes contort and her face is plunged by a “lip suck”. Pilger has pierced a hole in the bureaucratic faciality, disrupting the routinized expression of administrative affect. The good life is not all beaches. Povinelli (2002) points out that the reasonable principles of multiculturalism often run askew from ‘the social fact of

the feeling of *being obliged*' (p. 4). That is, people's 'moral sense' (p. 5) is associated with affective encounters that do not entirely correspond to 'public reason'. Interview after interview, Pilger scrapes away at the reasonableness that corresponds to publicity, particularly within the multicultural context. The deflective surface of white man faciality is an attempt to align affect with reason, but this alignment, however smooth, often does not cover underlying affective obligations (to one's community, one's sense of self).

Ironic amusement about the stupidity of "the powers that be" gives Quirk a chance to align her affect with public reason, but this alignment turns towards the administrative structure itself, disavowing the affects that can be traced to the feeling of *being obliged* by an underlying racism. The lip suck punctures this alignment, exposing a common affective ground with the national story of optimism. Elsewhere in *Utopia* we see how white man faciality attempts to align affect with reason. "You're proud of the present?" Pilger asks the NT Minister for Indigenous Health Warren Snowden. "I'm proud of the response this government has made in a poor set of circumstances for Aboriginal people, not only there [in Utopia], but in other communities across this country", he responds. A scene from an Aboriginal Community—a 47 year-old man who suffered rheumatic heart disease as a child has died—is sandwiched within the interview with Snowden. His proud faciality bears little reflection on this loss. His face speaks for itself, a deflective surface, a wall of mirrors, a bloc of sound; a mediation of an administrative rationale (irony, pride, matter of factness) and an ontology of grief; an air of whiteness inside an Australian chronotope. The humanitarian face is a rational face: Pilger is after a guilty face, a culpable face, a bad emotion, but these are still the faces of whiteness. We are still inside a system of mirrors, the surfaces of deflection.

Moving from Rottnest Island to Quirk, Pilger narrates: “Rottnest Island is not the past. Western Australia is a state of imprisonment for Black Australians”. A shot of the unmarked mass grave at Rottnest—gum trees rising up to the sunlight—cross fades with the barbed wired fencing surrounding a prison. Two brief shots inside the prison are followed by a view from the side of the road—the camera follows a white van speeding past on the open red-dust road. Next the camera faces the back of the van, where a cage door opens onto a bare, windowless cavity. The camera moves in to the vehicle, up to the marked roof, to a black board etched with graffiti where there should be a window to the driver. From inside the van, the camera fixes on the back door closing shut. We are in darkness but for a tiny light that creeps through the square mesh. Cut again to the van driving past, before the camera points up to the white sun: “On Australia Day 2008, an Aboriginal man, Mr Ward, died a terrible death as he was driven 300 miles in this prison van in blazing heat. The temperature in the mobile cell reached 56 degrees centigrade [Celsius]. The coroner called it a disgrace. The Director of Public Prosecutions took 2 years before deciding to do nothing. Eventually the van drivers, their employers, and the prisons department, were fined for a breach of health and safety regulations”. The film then cuts to Quirk, whose response I have discussed.

The deflective surface of white man faciality stands in relation to a space of disappearance. The prison van is a space in which an Aboriginal life has disappeared. The unmarked graves and prison site at Karma Rottnest Lodge are spaces in which Aboriginal lives were taken. The sun coming up in Ampilatwatja is a space of abandonment and disappearance. The family abandoned their humpy: “When an Aboriginal person dies, their home dies with them”. Elsewhere, Pilger travels with Arthur Murray to Wee Waa, where his son Eddie Murray died in police custody.

“What are your feelings coming back to Wee Waa?” asks Pilger. “John, you know, it’s hard to come back to this place. It’s a sense of losing a boy”. The watch house at Wee Waa is a space of disappearance. Footage from a previous documentary (Pilger 1998) shows Murray with his late wife Leila. They sit on their sofa, asking for justice. Pilger and Murray visit Eddie and Leila Murry’s graves: “all she felt John was pain and sorrow. She thought that maybe one day she would get justice”. They stand surrounded by headstones adorned with flowers. Arthur wears a ‘Stop Black Deaths in Custody’ t-shirt—the death of his son “began a campaign on behalf of so many others” suggests Pilger. Elsewhere in the film we see CCTV footage from the Alice Springs watch house, the police standing by while Mr Briscoe dies from intoxication and asphyxia. As the sound fades out we are presented with an extra-textual portrait of Pilger, his arm around Murray, and a title that reads ‘Arthur Murray 1942-2012’. For Arthur Murry, recognition of the role of white Australia in Black deaths in custody would have meant “justice”. The possibility for justice has now disappeared. Towards the end of the film, we visit the parents of Rob Eggington whose life disappeared when he committed suicide. Robert and Selina Egginton have created a sanctuary for those who have lost loved ones to suicide. Their Suicide Memorial Wall is covered with photographs.

The “other Australia” is the Australia in which Aboriginal lives have disappeared—through battle, murder, disease, assimilation, and now through the late modern phenomena of ‘slow death’. Berlant (2011) defines slow death as ‘the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence’ (p. 95). In slow death, ways of living are entangled with ways of dying—the wearing out of life is managed. Slow death is mediated affectively by the ‘environment’ in which ‘structural

conditions are suffused through a variety of mediations' (p. 101). Faces, administrative discourse, and tourist ventures are all examples of such suffusing mediations. They constitute the 'continuing ideological and historic-political structures that suppress indigenous voice in the "Australian" situation' (McAllan 2013, p. 1). The bringing of the background into the foreground is a recurring textual trope throughout the film, but also a spatial and visual strategy of representation that hinges on a variety of affective mediations. It is through attending to affective mediation that *Utopia* becomes itself an entry point into the affective structure of whiteness. This structure takes material form in the surfaces of deflection and absorption. Each of these qualities expresses whiteness, gives whiteness form as an affective structure that can take or transform Indigenous life (including through the disappearance of the possibility of accountability). Quirk's office was just as much a space of disappearance as the prison van.

Locales express the architecture of *a feeling*. Feelings can *propose* that 'certain ways of life are *the* ways of life and must be defended, even and especially against reality itself' (Murphie this issue). Extracting a new form from the media of faces, spaces and media archives, *Utopia* mediates these local architectures. In so doing the film also expresses a becoming of an Australian chronotope, composed of absorptive and deflective surfaces. *Utopia* describes 'the historical present as a back-formation from practices that create a perceptible sense, an atmosphere that can be returned to' (Berlant 2011, p. 100). The resulting expression of feeling also proposes that certain ways of life must be defended against a more dominant affective structure: the film is an encounter with that defensive structure. Through traversing the locales of whiteness, the film also locates whiteness spatially as an atmosphere that can be returned to. In this way, *Utopia* tracks places that keep open or foreclose

the possibility of return. Openness to futurity is expressed in an image of a space—how places are socially-culturally inscribed, the decomposing of a face, the puncturing of administrative affect.

### **Mediating affect: the formation of a colonial present**

When I first watched *Utopia* I saw the film in a certain way. It was early 2014 and I had been back in the UK for less than a year having ‘returned’ from Australia where I had studied for my PhD in Sydney and beyond. I watched the film with a liminal eye, between places and faces. The multiplicity of being “here” and “there” resonated with the location of the film, which is at times intimate with the ‘the structural and material violence of ongoing occupation’ (Lea *et al.* 2012, p. 140) and at others, removed. Pilger himself left Australia for the UK in the early 1960s. I cannot recall exactly how a more considered engagement with the film emerged. Certainly the viewing context probed questions—I first watched the film at a viewing hosted by undergraduates of an elite university with an interest in Indigenous politics, and whose various interjections in response to the film skidded off its surface so as to attest to the insurmountable distances articulated by its context. This event stimulated my interest in both the ‘empirics’ and ‘context of possibilities’ (Grossberg 2010, p. 57) that emerged in the ‘discursive expression and affective mediation’ (p. 170) of the film—how the film assembled something from within a formation.

At the end of the film a panning shot of Sydney again invokes ‘the good life’—now understood in relation to ‘Indigenous disadvantage’ as a lair of political stasis and moral culpability. In the frame, Pilger stands across the water from the city’s iconic Sydney Harbour Bridge, staging the distance between himself / the film and the racialized ‘affective atmosphere’ (Anderson 2009, p. 77) the film has

investigated. Pilger calls for the sharing of “this rich country, its land, its resources and opportunities” with the First Australians: “For until we give back their nationhood, we can never claim our own”. Despite its Euro-modernist view, here the film converges with Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos’s (2014) argument, that the being of the occupier is bound to Indigenous ontologies. This bind is cruel—evident in the formations that prohibit ethical relations between white and black Australians, and insofar as white Australian attachment to the world is based on a ‘scene of fantasy’ that prohibits the very ‘expansive transformation’ it promises (Berlant 2011, p. 2). This final shot echoes the spatial configuration of the film’s plea to white Australians to end this cruelty.

The final shot invokes too the world outside of Australia as key to the reflexive spectatorship to which the film aspires: its discourse is shot through with the humanitarian imperative that originated in the post-WWII formation of the ‘international community’. In this context a remnant of the colonial world circulates: epidemiological facts are reminiscent of “Dickensian England”; rates of rheumatic heart disease and trachoma place Australia in the “Third World”. These facts locate Australia in the ‘wrong’ place at the ‘wrong’ time. The structure of feeling articulates that left over from another time—British colonialism is perpetually in motion within the affective structure of whiteness.

Utopia disturbs the present by engaging the dynamic of intensities between deflective surfaces and absorptive surfaces. The affective structure of whiteness takes place through the film’s conception of near and far, through the elicitation of pressure points that bring into relief the switch points and vectors by which one feeling is put into relation with another, and through the ways in which the present is socially conceived and emerges through spatial inscription. This structure of deflection and



absorption reifies whiteness as a structure of affect, folding the expression trauma and grief into the constraints of slow death. Whiteness is expressed in forms of writing that limit affect according to ‘our own bodily limits’ (Gibbs 2006, p. pp, see also Richardson this issue)—the limit placed on the expression of feeling incurs its own structure of missing. The affective structures of whiteness keep ‘what is happening’ from ‘us’—feelings difficult to experience collectively, but nevertheless in motion as a potential to be felt. The *us* here takes form in the lives whose present is disturbed by what is kept at bay through the affective structure of whiteness that is mediated to us by the good life.

Acknowledgements

Withheld for reasons of anonymity.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> I have taken this term ‘Indigenous element’ from a televised interview with Lang Hancock that is treated as a media source in *Utopia*.

<sup>2</sup> My use of names follows their use in the documentary film, which means that I may use the names of people who are recently deceased.

<sup>3</sup> The song was written by Jack Lumsdane, according to one journalist “issued for Canberra’s 25 birthday.” The score is archived and digitized by The National Archive of Australia, available here: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-173134686/view#page/n1/mode/1up>. I could not locate the film (for which the song is an accompaniment). This song has been a subject of critical acclaim. For example, the song was the subject of a recent competition on ABC Canberra radio. Read at:

<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2011/03/27/3174787.htm>

<sup>4</sup> As described by the journalist in the television show cited by *Utopia*.

---

<sup>5</sup> Clip available here: <http://aso.gov.au/titles/documentaries/couldnt-be-fairer/clip2/>

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Andrew Murphie for this clarification.

<sup>7</sup> Thank you to Nayana Bibile for this turn of phrase. Personal conversation.

<sup>8</sup> We see many illustrations of this bouncing off the wall in film, for example, Matt Ross' *Captain Fantastic* (2016) or Sean Penn's *Into the Wild* (2007).

## References

- Altman, J. and Hinkson, M., eds., 2010. *Culture crisis: anthropology and politics in Aboriginal Australia*. Sydney: UNSW Press.
- Anderson, B., 2011. Affect and biopolitics: towards a politics of life. *Transactions of the institute of British geographers*, 37 (1), 28—43.
- Anderson, B., 2009. Affective atmospheres. *Emotion, space and society*, 2 (2), 77—81.
- Atkinson, J., 2002. *Trauma trails: effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia*. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Berlant, L., 2011. *Cruel optimism*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, J., 2009. *North of empire: essays on the cultural technologies of space*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Creative Spirits, 2017. Aboriginal culture - Law & justice - Aboriginal prison rates, <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/law/aboriginal-prison-rates#ixzz4cv8hWqAp>. retrieved 1 April.
- Deleuze, G., 1992. Mediators. In: J. Crary, and S. Kwinter, eds., *Incorporations*. New York: Zone Books, 280–95.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F., 1987. *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

- 
- Gibbs, A., 2006. Writing and danger: the intercorporeality of affect. *In*: N. Krauth and T. Brady, eds., *Creative writing: theory beyond practice*. Teneriffe: Post Pressed, 157–168.
- Grossberg, L., 2010. *Cultural studies in the future tense*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Hage, G., 1998. *White nation: fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Kember, S. and Zylinska, J., 2012. *Life after new media: mediation as a vital process*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press.
- Lea, T., 2012. When looking for anarchy, look to the state: Fantasies of regulation in forcing disorder within the Australian Indigenous estate. *Critique of Anthropology*, 32 (2), 109–124.
- Lea, T., Young, M., F. Markham, M. Holmes and Doran, B., 2012. Being moved (on): the biopolitics of walking in Australia's frontier towns. *Radical history review*, 114, 139–163.
- Lewis, G., 2007. Racializing culture is ordinary. *Cultural studies*, 21 (6), 866—886.
- MacCormack, P., 2004. The probe-head and the faces of Australia: from Australia Post to Pluto. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 28 (81), 135—143.
- Macoun, A., 2011. Aboriginality and the Northern Territory Intervention. *Australian journal of political science*, 46 (3), 519–534.
- Maddison, S., 2011. *Beyond white guilt: the real challenge for black-white relations in Australia*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.
- McCallum, F., 2013. *Speaking-writing with: Aboriginal and settler interrelations*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

---

McCallum, K. and Waller, L., 2013. The intervention of media power in Indigenous policy-making. *Media international Australia*, 149 (November), 139—149.

Moreton-Robinson, A., ed., 2011. *Whitening race: essays in social and cultural criticism*. Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press.

Moreton-Robinson, A., ed., 2007. *Sovereign subjects: Indigenous sovereignty matters*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Moreton-Robinson, A., 2005. The house that Jack built: Britishness and white possession, *Australian critical race and whiteness studies association journal*, 1, 21–29.

Moreton-Robinson, A., 2003. I still call Australia home: Indigenous belonging and place in a white postcolonizing society. In: S. Ahmed, C. Castaneda, and A-M. Fortier, eds., *Uprootings/regroundings: questions of home and migration*. Bloomsbury: Berg Publishing, 23–40.

Moreton-Robinson, A. and Nicoll, F., 2006. We shall fight them on the beaches: protesting cultures of white possession. *Journal of Australian studies*, 30 (89), 149–160.

‘Most Indigenous Australians want date and name of Australia day changed, poll finds’. *The Guardian*, 25 January 2017. Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/jan/26/most-indigenous-australians-want-date-and-name-of-australia-day-changed-poll-finds>

Nicolacopoulos, T. and Vassilacopoulos, G., 2014. *Indigenous sovereignty and the being of the occupier: manifesto for a white Australian philosophy of origins*.

Melbourne: Re.press.

- 
- Osuri, G. and Banerjee, S.B., 2004. White diasporas: media representations of September 11 and the unbearable whiteness of being in Australia. *Social semiotics*, 14 (2), 151–171.
- Perera, S., 2009. *Australia and the insular imagination: beaches, borders, boats, and bodies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Perera, S. and Pugliese, J., 2001. Death in a dry river: black life, white property, parched justice. *Somatechnics*, 1 (1), 65—86.
- Povinelli, E., 2002. *The cunning of recognition: the making of Australian multiculturalism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Probyn, E., 1990. Travels in the postmodern: making sense of the local. In: L. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/postmodernism*. London and New York: Routledge, 176–189.
- Pugliese, J., 2002. Race as category crisis: whiteness and the topical assignation of race. *Social semiotics* 12 (2), 149–68.
- Rowse, T., 1992. *Remote possibilities: the Aboriginal domain and the administrative imagination*. Canberra, ACT: Australian National University.
- Seigworth, G. and Gregg, M., 2010. An inventory of shimmers. In: M. Gregg and G. Seigworth, eds., *Affect theory reader*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1–25.
- Stewart, K., 1996. *A space on the side of the road: cultural poetics in an “other” America*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Stewart, K., 2007. *Ordinary affects*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Utopia*, 2013. Film. Directed by John Pilger. Australia: Antidote Films.
- Ten pound poms*, 1997. Television film. Directed by Michael Davies. UK: Touch Productions & BBC Worldwide.

---

Wacquant, L., 2012. Three steps to a historical anthropology of actually existing neoliberalism. *Social Anthropology* 20 (1), 66–79.

Williams, R., 1977. Structures of feeling. *In: Marxism and literature*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 128–135.